

At 92, the legendary naturalist is trying to save the planet - for his grandchildren

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Byline: Brady Dennis The Washington Post

Body

Sir David Attenborough has been documenting nature for more than six decades. His various television series - such as Life on Earth, The Living Planet and Planet Earth - have taken viewers around the globe, capturing the beauty and complexity of the natural world.

At age 92, the renowned British naturalist is hardly finished.

In recent years, Attenborough increasingly has used his spellbinding whisper of a voice to describe the courtship rituals of birds of paradise or the mass migration of millions of Christmas Island red crabs - and to repeatedly sound the alarm about climate change.

Last fall, during a global climate conference in Poland, he told world leaders that "if we don't take action, the collapse of our civilization and the extinction of much of the natural world is on the horizon." Earlier this year at the World Economic Forum in Switzerland, Attenborough again pushed for action, warning, "The Garden of Eden is no more."

"The only conditions modern humans have ever known are changing and changing fast," he said at the time, adding: "It is tempting and understandable to ignore the evidence and carry on as usual or to be filled with doom and gloom ... We need to move beyond guilt or blame and get on with the practical tasks at hand."

Attenborough's latest project, an eight-part Netflix series produced in partnership with the World Wildlife Fund, is full of sobering reminders about how climate change is threatening significant parts of the natural world, coupled with the hope that humans might find the collective willpower to avert catastrophic consequences.

Our Planet was filmed over four years and across every continent, taking viewers to the remote Arctic wilderness, the vast plains of Africa and the depths of the world's oceans to explore how much of nature is changing - and in many ways, vanishing - in the age of climate change. Its central message is one of urgency.

"What we do in the next 20 years will determine the future for all life on Earth," Attenborough intones in Our Planet's first episode.

Before a screening last week at the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History, Attenborough spoke with The Washington Post about the project, his reasons for optimism and what keeps him motivated. What follows has been edited for length and clarity:

You've been documenting the natural world for six decades. And often with this very distinctive sense of wonder. And while a lot of your series have talked about the concerns with the state of the environment, only in more recent

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years have you been more outspoken about climate change and about the threat that it poses. What changed for you?

Well, not quite true. For example, 20 years ago, I was on Easter Island, explaining (how) Easter Island was an example of a culture that destroyed its own environment and eventually killed itself, as it were. And I ended that series by saying that unless we (avoid that), we're going to do it for the whole planet. The funny thing is people took no notice. They said, "Oh, yeah, you're wrong about that." Well, that was over 20 years ago. But now, of course, we are absolutely explicit about it because the scientists worldwide are absolutely unanimous about this. There's no question that the world is warming. No question about that. The degree to which we are responsible is argued about by some but most are absolutely agreed that humanity - we are the prime cause of this latest rise.

In Our Planet there's this sense of loss - whether it's the loss of habitat, or the loss of forests in Borneo or coral reefs in Australia. As a viewer, you're kind of left to ponder all that's disappearing from the natural world. What do you and the producers want people to take away from this? What do you want people to come away thinking about?

A number of things. One is, that we are totally dependent upon the natural world for every mouthful of food we eat and every lungful of air that we breathe. If we damage the natural world, we reduce that, so we damage ourselves. That's the first.

The second thing is that they should see - because the United Nations tell us that most people these days are urbanized, out of touch with the natural world to some degree - that they should see the complexity, the beauty and the wonder of the natural world on which we depend. And finally, they should see that we have got to do something to look after it because, the way things are going, we are running into serious trouble.

When you addressed a climate conference in Poland recently, you had a pretty simple message for the leaders there, which is, "You must lead." So how's the world doing? Who's leading? Is there a lack of leadership?

Well, it's a big problem. It's not easy. It's not easy to get all the nations in the world, of all kinds, (in agreement). It's hardly ever happened before. It happened when we saved whales. But that was just a section of humanity. Those maritime nations and people who fished - they could see the problem, and they dealt with it. What we're dealing with now is the entire globe, and that is a very big thing to do.

Since we are here in the United States, what do you make of the reversal of this country on climate action and what that means for the broader world?

Well, I mean it's a big blow. Can't deny that. This country, the United States, consumes more and takes more from the natural world per capita than anybody in the entire globe. ... It makes it more and more urgent that we keep going.

This series certainly tries to highlight the problems facing the natural world and the dangers posed by climate change, and it carries this conservation message. Maybe less clear - to all of us - are what the solutions are. And I wonder what you see as some of the main solutions. And more important, how optimistic are you that we as a people can act?

The main problem, of course, is carbon. And a high proportion of our energy - the dominant source - has been from dealing with carbon, and we have to get out of that. We have the technology. There are problems - problems in storage, for example, storing electricity and power. It's a difficult one to do. We haven't done it properly ... Think if it cost almost nothing to take energy from the Sahara in the middle of Africa for example and feed it to, say, southern Europe for nothing? I mean (the sun) is up, we've got it all the time. Why aren't we using it? And if you get the scientific brains of the world to turn themselves to that problem - if this country can send men to the moon, you know, I'm jolly sure that if it put its mind to it, it could solve that particular problem of electricity.

On a personal note, do you have any intentions of winding down in any way? Is there always a next project? What gets you out of bed each day?

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What's getting me out of bed initially, of course, is that I can think of nothing nicer than spending my time looking at the natural world. But what gets me out of bed, too, is the knowledge that I have grandchildren - I don't have great-grandchildren yet, but I hope I will have - I care about what's going on with the next generation.

And the great source of comfort I have is that younger people today are more activated than they have ever been. And if you want to take a section of the population and see where is the anxiety - it is them. It is their world. We have messed it up. My generation certainly have messed it up, and we're giving it to them.

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